

Sūrah Layl

Central Theme and Relationship with the Preceding Sūrah

This *sūrah* forms a pair with Sūrah Shams, the previous *sūrah*. There is no essential difference between the central themes of the two. Such is the extent of similarity and correspondence between the inner and outer aspects of both that even a common reader of the Qur'ān can feel the harmony and similarity between them.

In the previous *sūrah*, it is stated about the human soul: قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَنْ زَكَّاهَا وَقَدْ خَابَ مَنْ دَسَّاهَا (91:7-10) (he succeeded who purified it and he failed who contaminated it, (91:7-10)). In this *sūrah*, this basic issue has been taken up and the things which contaminate it are explained and the strategy to protect it and things which purify and the way this purification is achieved are also discussed.

Analysis of the Meanings

Following is the sequence of the discourse:

Verses (1-4): The evidence of the world around man and the world within him is presented to show that the Day of Judgement is bound to come. In this world, the Almighty has created everything in pairs. Everything becomes meaningful in conjunction with its counterpart. This proves that this world also has a counterpart: the Hereafter which makes the world a meaningful place. Without it, it becomes a meaningless place in which good and evil are of the same status even though there is an obvious difference between them.

Verses (5-7): Mentioned in these verses are the character and ideology which entitles a person to the successes of the Hereafter and also smoothes out the way for him to reach it.

Verses (8-10): Mentioned in these verses are the character and ideology of a person which lead him to doom and to the pit of Hell.

Verses (11-14): The Quraysh are admonished that the only responsibility of God is to guide them, which He has. It is not His responsibility to make them adopt this guidance. If they tread on the path of guidance, it is they who will benefit otherwise they should know that this world and the next are in the grasp of God. Neither can anyone save them here from Him nor be of any benefit to them in the world to come.

Verses (15-21): An explanation of the character of people who will be

thrown into Hell and those who will be shielded from it and how they will be rewarded.

Text and Translation

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
وَاللَّيْلِ إِذَا يَغْشَى (١) وَالتَّهَارِ إِذَا تَجَلَّى (٢) وَمَا خَلَقَ الذَّكَرَ وَالْأُنثَى (٣) إِنَّ سَعْيَكُمْ لَشَتَّى (٤) فَأَمَّا مَنْ أَعْطَى وَاتَّقَى (٥) وَصَدَّقَ بِالْحُسْنَى (٦) فَسَنُيَسِّرُهُ لِلْيُسْرَى (٧) وَأَمَّا مَنْ بَخِلَ وَاسْتَغْنَى (٨) وَكَذَّبَ بِالْحُسْنَى (٩) فَسَنُيَسِّرُهُ لِلْعُسْرَى (١٠) وَمَا يُغْنِي عَنْهُ مَالُهُ إِذَا تَرَدَّى (١١) إِنَّ عَلَيْنَا لَلْهُدَى (١٢) وَإِنَّ لَنَا لَلْآخِرَةَ وَالْأُولَى (١٣) فَأُنذِرُكُم نَارًا تَلْقَى (١٤) لَا يَصْلَاهَا إِلَّا الْأَشْقَى (١٥) الَّذِي كَذَّبَ وَتَوَلَّى (١٦) وَسَيُجَنَّبُهَا الْأَتْقَى (١٧) الَّذِي يُؤْتِي مَالَهُ يَتَزَكَّى (١٨) وَمَا لِأَحَدٍ عِنْدَهُ مِنْ نِعْمَةٍ تُجْزَى (١٩) إِلَّا ابْتِغَاءَ وَجْهِ رَبِّهِ الْأَعْلَى (٢٠) وَلَسَوْفَ يَرْضَى (٢١)

In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Ever Merciful.

The night when it darkens bears witness and the day when it brightens and the creation of the male and the female species also that your earning is different from one another. (1-4)

So, he who gave in the way of Allah and was God-fearing and believed in good fate, We shall entitle him to a destination of joy. And he who was a miser and was indifferent and belied good fate, We shall grant him respite for a destination of hardship. (5-10)

And what will his wealth avail him when he plunges into the Pit! It is for Us to impart understanding! And in Our control is the next world and this world also. So I have informed you of the blazing fire. (11-13)

Only he shall enter it who is the most wretched; who denied and turned away. And the God-fearing shall be protected from it who spends his wealth to achieve purity and who does not confer favours on anyone for recompense but only to seek the countenance of his Lord, Most High. And he shall also prosper. (14-21)

Explanation

وَاللَّيْلِ إِذَا يَغْشَى (١) وَالتَّهَارِ إِذَا تَجَلَّى (٢) وَمَا خَلَقَ الذَّكَرَ وَالْأُنثَى (٣)¹

We have been explaining at various instances in this *tafsīr* that the various oaths sworn by natural phenomenon are meant to substantiate a premise. The night and day and the male and female species form

1. The night when it darkens bears witness and the day when it brightens and the creation of the male and the female species also

complementary pairs and together these pairs fulfil the purpose for which they have been created by the Almighty. Each member of a pair possesses a void which is only filled by the other. Without its counterpart neither does a thing have any use nor can one understand the purpose of granting it with certain capabilities. The Qur'ān has not only presented this harmony between opposing members of a pair as an argument on monotheism which we have alluded to under relevant verses, it has also presented it as an argument to substantiate the Hereafter as is the case in this verse. For example it is said in Sūrah Dhāriyāt: **وَمِنْ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ خَلَقْنَا زَوْجَيْنِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَذَكَّرُونَ** (and made pairs from all things, so that you may receive reminder, (51:49)) ie receive reminder on the fact that this world also has its counterpart with which it forms a pair and it is with this counterpart that it fulfills the purpose for which it had been created. We have already explained this aspect in the referred to verse of Sūrah Dhāriyāt and at other places of this *tafsīr* as well. I shall also elaborate upon it when in the coming verses of this *sūrah*, the complement of oath (*muqsim* 'alayh) is explained.

The particle **مَا** in the verse **وَمَا خَلَقَ الذَّكَرَ وَالْأُنثَىٰ** is of the nature of a verbal noun (مصدرية). I have already discussed it under the fifth verse of the previous *sūrah*. Repeating it here would be needless.

إِنَّ سَعْيَكُمْ لَشَتَّىٰ²

This is the claim which is substantiated from the oaths sworn in the previous verses: the fact that every object exists in this world in pairs and the fact that it is together with its counterpart that an object fulfills the purpose for which both have been created shows that this world also has a counterpart which is the next world. This next world is a certainty and it is with it that this world seems a meaningful creation; otherwise it is a meaningless and pointless entity. If there is no next world, this would mean that the righteous and the wrongdoers are of equal status before the Creator. It is of course is against the majesty of a Wise Creator that He regard the reward each earns from his deeds to be equal.

The word **سَعَىٰ** is used not only for effort it is also used for the consequences of an effort and here it is used in this latter sense. In the following verse, an example of this usage can be seen: **وَأَن لَّيْسَ لِلْإِنسَانِ إِلَّا (وَأَنَّ سَعْيُهُ سَوْفَ يُرَىٰ (53:39-40))** (and that each man shall be judged only by what he strove for and that his labours shall soon be examined, (53:39-40))

The word **شَتَّىٰ** is the plural of **شَتِيتٌ** and refers to what is different and

2. That your earning is different from one another.

separate from one another. The implication is that it is an obvious requirement of human nature and intellect that the consequences of the سَعَى of the righteous and the wrongdoers be different: those who have done virtuous deeds be rewarded and those who have done evil deeds will be rewarded accordingly. In other words, the claim that a Day of Judgement must come has been presented here on the basis of the real need for the advent of such a day: it is essential that such a day come because without it this world is nothing but a place of merrymaking where one may go scot-free for all one's deeds. Thus, for this reason, the Qur'ān has asked people who do not believe in the Day of Judgement: أَفَحَسِبْتُمْ أَنَّمَا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ عَبَثًا وَأَنَّكُمْ إِلَيْنَا لَا تُرْجَعُونَ (١١٥:٢٣) (Do you think that We have created you in vain and that to Us you would never be returned? (23:115). At another instance, this same question is posed in a manner expressing amazement to those who deny the Day of Judgement: أَفَتَجْعَلُ الْمُسْلِمِينَ كَالْمُجْرِمِينَ مَا لَكُمْ كَيْفَ تَحْكُمُونَ (٣٦-٣٥:٦٨) (Are We to deal with those who submit to Us as We deal with those who transgress? What is the matter with you? What is this judgement you make? (68:35-36)).

فَأَمَّا مَنْ أَعْطَى وَاتَّقَى (٥) وَصَدَّقَ بِالْحُسْنَى (٦) فَسَنُيَسِّرُهُ لِلْيُسْرَى (٧)³

This verse mentions the details of the difference between what the righteous and wrongdoers will earn there and which should also become evident.

A mention of the word اتَّقَى after أَعْطَى is to express the fact that the purpose of this spending in the way of God should not be to boast and brag or some other worldly motive: it should only be the desire to gain the pleasure of the Lord and the fear of the day on which nothing except good deeds shall avail a person. In Sūrah Dahr, this aspect is explained thus:

يُوفُونَ بِالنَّذْرِ وَيَخَافُونَ يَوْمًا كَانَ شَرُّهُ مُسْتَطِيرًا وَيُطْعِمُونَ الطَّعَامَ عَلَى حُبِّهِ مِسْكِينًا وَيَتِيمًا وَأَسِيرًا إِنَّمَا نُطْعِمُكُمْ لِوَجْهِ اللَّهِ لَا نُرِيدُ مِنْكُمْ جَزَاءً وَلَا شُكْرًا إِنَّا نَخَافُ مِنْ رَبَّنَا يَوْمًا غَیْبًا قَمَطِيرًا (٧٦:٧-١٠)

They used to keep their vows and remained fearful of the Day whose horror will spread far and wide, and used to give food to the poor, the orphan and the captive in spite of being needy of it; [their driving force being:] we are feeding you for Allah only. Indeed, we dread

3. So, he who gave in the way of Allah and was God-fearing and believed in good fate, We shall entitle him to a destination of joy.

from our Lord a Day, grim and distressful. (76:7-10)

In the expression وَصَدَّقَ بِالْحُسْنَى, the noun qualified by the adjective الْحُسْنَى is suppressed. The suppressed noun is الْعَاقِبَةُ (fate) or some other of similar meaning. The implication is that they have faith that spending in the way of God and virtue will reap good results for them. This also is a mention of the real motive of their virtue: together with the fear of the Hereafter, they also have the faith that the Almighty will reward them for all their good deeds.

A person who neither has any fear of the Hereafter nor does he believe that the tiniest of his virtuous acts will be rewarded in the Hereafter will, in the first place, not find any urge in him to spend and if he does, he will necessarily do it for some worldly need. Such spending does not have any blessings from the Almighty. It is stated in Sūrah Mā'un: أَرَأَيْتَ الَّذِي يُكَذِّبُ بِالدِّينِ فَذَلِكَ الَّذِي يَدْعُ الْيَتِيمَ وَلَا يَخْضُ عَلَى طَعَامِ الْمَسْكِينِ (107:1-3) (Have you seen the one who belies the Day of reward and punishment?! He it is who drives away the orphan, and urges not the feeding of the poor. (107:1-3))

In the expression فَسَنَيْسِرُهُ لِلْيُسْرَى the noun qualified by the adjective الْيُسْرَى is suppressed like that of الْحُسْنَى in the previous verse. The implied expression is الْعَاقِبَةُ الْيُسْرَى. This also is a mention of the practice of the Almighty mentioned at many places in the Qur'an: The Almighty facilitates a person who adopts the path of virtue by removing the hardships that come his way and by giving him the urge to tread this path with more vigour. Thus at one place in the Qur'an it is said: وَلِلَّذِينَ جَاهَدُوا فِيْنَا لَنَهْدِيَنَّهُمْ سُبُلَنَا (29:69) (Those who will strive in Our cause, We shall guide them to Our paths, (29:69)). In the verse under discussion, his destination has been called الْيُسْرَى (easy) because his reckoning will be easy. Consequently, it is said in Sūrah Inshiqāq: فَسَوْفَ يُحَاسَبُ حِسَابًا يَسِيرًا (84:7-8) (And he who is handed his account in his right hand, his reckoning will be very easy, (84-7-8)).

وَأَمَّا مَنْ بَخِلَ وَاسْتَغْنَى (٨) وَكَذَّبَ بِالْحُسْنَى (٩) فَسَنَيْسِرُهُ لِلْعُسْرَى (١٠)⁴

This is a mention of people who regard this worldly life to be the real life. They are misers and callously guard their wealth and have no fear of the Hereafter; they neither believe in any day of reward nor have the guts to struggle hard for it. The fate of such people will be completely opposite to the ones mentioned earlier. The Almighty will grant them the

4. And he who was a miser and was indifferent and belied good fate, We shall grant him respite for a destination of hardship.

respite to tread the path they have chosen for themselves and this will lead them to a destination which will be full of hardships. Here too the noun qualified by the adjective الْعُسْرَى is suppressed and the word تَيْسِيرٌ connotes giving respite.

At many places in the Qur'ān, this practice of the Almighty has been mentioned that people who do not have the courage to adopt the path of virtue are left by the Almighty at the mercy of their base desires. They encounter no opposition from these base desires with them and for this reason they think that they are smoothly going on in life. While becoming a prey to these base desires, they reach the end of their lives. After this comes the phase to which the Qur'ān has referred by the words: سَأَرْهُقُهُ (soon I will make him climb a mounting slope, (74: 17)). In these verses, under discussion, it is this phase which is alluded to.

Diametrically opposite are the lives of people who muster courage to tread the path of faith and do righteous deeds. At every step, they have to fight their base desires and it is through this assault that they gradually gain the strength needed to fight the hardships of this path. Finally they reach their destination mentioned thus in the Qur'ān: فَادْخُلِي فِي عِبَادِي: (Return) and enter among My servants and enter My Paradise, (89:29-30)).

وَمَا يُغْنِي عَنْهُ مَالُهُ إِذَا تَرَدَّى⁵

Here the particle مَا can be for negation and can also be interrogative. There is not much difference between the two; however, in case of the latter, an emphasis shall be added to the verse and for this reason I have given preference to it. The verse actually admonishes people who in spite of having wealth evade spending it in the way of God. The implication of the verse is that if wealth has any permanent benefit for a person, then it is spending it for the cause of God and saving it for one's eternal life. If a person is not able to do this, then not only will this wealth be of no benefit to him, it will become a source of doom for him.

إِنَّ عَلَيْنَا لَلْهُدَىٰ (١٢) وَإِنَّ لَنَا لَلْآخِرَةَ وَالْأُولَىٰ⁶

The admonition sounded above is repeated here in different words: It is the responsibility of God to guide people which He has by sending His Messenger. It is not His responsibility to force this guidance on people.

5. And what will his wealth avail him when he plunges into the Pit!

6. It is for Us to impart understanding! And in Our control is the next world and this world also.

Accepting this guidance is their responsibility. Those who accept it, will succeed and those who do not will face its consequences.

The words وَإِنَّ لَنَا لَلْآخِرَةَ وَالْأُولَى in fact augment the admonition even further: people should keep in mind that whether it is this world or the next, both are in the control of the Almighty. With one's own strategy no one can achieve anything in this world nor in the next. If anyone is banking on one's racial superiority or on one's deities, he should know that such things will not be found in the Hereafter. There each person will face the Almighty alone. In Sūrah Najm (53:25), this aspect has already been discussed.

Readers are advised to take a second look at verse eight earlier.

وَأَمَّا مَنْ بَخِلَ وَاسْتَغْنَى. The wealthy often vainly think that the wealth and riches they have are because of some strategy and tactic of their own. For this reason they think that they have no need for God. When Qārūn (Korah of the Bible) was reminded that he should acknowledge his obligation to God because the wealth he has is from God. He replied: إِنَّمَا أُوتِيْتُهُ عَلَىٰ عِلْمٍ (these riches were given me on account of the knowledge I possess, (28:78)). The implication being that he has obtained it through his own ability and intelligence and God has no role in giving it to him. This, more or less, is the mentality of every capitalist. The Qur'ān by using the words وَإِنَّ لَنَا لَلْآخِرَةَ وَالْأُولَى (and in Our control is the next world and this world also) has actually severely dented this concept: these words stress that whatever a person obtains in this world is from God and whatever he will in the next is also from God. No one is His partner, neither in this world nor in the next.

فَأَنْذَرْتُكُمْ نَارًا تَلَظَّى (١٤) لَا يَصْلَاهَا إِلَّا الْأَشْقَى (١٥) الَّذِي كَذَّبَ وَتَوَلَّى (١٦)
وَسَيُجَنَّبُهَا الْأَتْقَى (١٧) الَّذِي يُؤْتِي مَالَهُ يَتَزَكَّى (١٨)⁷

After stating the principle described earlier in general terms, here in these verses, the Quraysh are addressed and warned beforehand of the blazing fire they will have to face as a result of their denial and rejection of the truth. Only those people will be caste into it who are the wretched and who persist in their denial. On the other hand, people who spend their wealth to attain purity will be shielded from this fire.

It should remain clear that the comparison here is not been the less wretched and the more wretched and the less pious and the more pious. It

7. So I have informed you of the blazing fire. Only he shall enter it who is the most wretched; who denied and turned away. And the God-fearing shall be protected from it who spends his wealth to achieve purity.

is between the rejecters of the Messengers of God and those who profess faith in them. A Messenger is able to completely communicate the truth to his addressees such that they are not left with any legitimate excuse to deny it; therefore, all his rejecters are أَشَقَّى (the most wretched). Thus the word أَشَقَّى is qualified by the attributes الَّذِي كَذَّبَ وَتَوَلَّى (who denied and turned away) which shows that here the reference is to people who have denied the Messenger is his very presence. It is such people who are the most wretched and will be caste into the blazing fire prepared for them much before they will enter it. On the other hand, people who get hold of themselves as a result of the warnings sounded by the Messenger and prepared for the accountability of the Day of Judgement and spent in the way of God to cleanse it from stains that soil it are all أَتَّقَى (the God fearing). The reason for this is that they acknowledged the Messenger when the society in its collective capacity was his enemy and adopted the path of virtue in times when there were very few who had the strength to tread this path. It is for this reason that the status of the people who become the companions of a Messenger in the initial stages is that of the *sābiqūn* (the foremost) and the *muqarrabūn* (the nearest) and very few people of the later stages are lucky enough to gain this status.

Some people have argued on the basis of this verse that Hell is reserved only for people who are the most wretched. The less wretched shall not be caste into Hell. This conclusion holds little ground. If it is regarded as correct, then a person can also interpret this verse to mean that only those people will be shielded from Hell who are the most pious (أَتَّقَى). The general pious ones would not be shielded from it. It can also be interpreted from this verse that only the most pious (أَتَّقَى) would be entitled to Paradise. The general pious ones would be deprived from it. Obviously, all these interpretations are erroneous. Those who have interpreted this verse in this manner have misunderstood it because of not being able to comprehend it in its true context and occurrence. I have endeavoured to explain this context after which hopefully such misunderstandings would not result.

وَمَا لِأَحَدٍ عِنْدَهُ مِنْ نِعْمَةٍ تُجْزَى إِلَّا ابْتِغَاءَ وَجْهِ رَبِّهِ الْأَعْلَى (٢٠)⁸

This is an explanation of the words يُؤْتِي مَالَهُ يَتَزَكَّى: only that spending in the way of God to purify one's wealth has any significance in the eyes of God which is done to please Him. It should not be the case that a person actually does a favour on another so that he can in return gain some

8. and who does not confer favours on anyone for recompense but only to seek the countenance of his Lord, Most High.

favour from him. Sūrah Dahr also mentions this aspect: **إِنَّمَا نُنْطَعِمُكُمْ لَوْجِهٍ** (no reward do we desire from you nor gratitude, (76:9)). Some people have translated this verse as: “And no one has done him a favour for which he is obliged to repay it.” Although this translation cannot be regarded as linguistically incorrect; however, if this means that if a person spends on someone who has done him some favour, then such spending would not be regarded as being done to please the Almighty, then this is not comprehensible. If a person does a favour to another person to repay a favour, then though this might not be equivalent to a favour done by a person to someone who has not done a favour to that person, but why should it not be counted as an act of virtue. If on one occasion, a poor person quenched another person’s thirst and if this second person at some other occasion fed the first, then how can this act not be regarded as being done to please the Almighty? Readers are advised to take another look at the way I have translated this verse. In my opinion, it is correct linguistically also and does not create any confusion as regards the interpretation of the verse.

وَلَسَوْفَ يَرْضَىٰ (٢١)⁹

This verse gives glad tidings to people who are fortunate enough to spend in the way of God in the manner described earlier: Words are unable to state the extent of what the Almighty has promised in this verse. They refer to what is stated at the end of Sūrah Fajr: **رَاضِيَةً مَّرْضِيَّةً** (٢٨:٨٩) (they will be happy with their Lord and their Lord will be happy with them, (89:28))

With these words, we come to the end of the exegesis of this *sūrah*. **فَالْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ أَوَّلًا وَآخِرًا** (Gratitude be to God from the beginning to the end).

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